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23 Most Frequently asked Questions About LICE

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TEXAS STATE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH



REMEMBER! LICE CAN BE AVOIDED!

NEVER SHARE COMBS OR ARTICLES OF CLOTHING WITH OTHERS!

THIS IS THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE!

1. What are lice?

Lice are small grayish-white insects, 1/16 to 1/8 inches in length.

2. Is there more than one kind of louse?

There are many species or kinds of lice, but each kind usually feeds on a single kind of host. For instance, human lice can establish and maintain themselves only on humans. There are three types of human lice: The head louse, Pediculus humanus capitus; the body louse, Pediculus humanus humanus; and the crab louse, Pthirus pubis.

3. Where do they live?

- a. Head lice live on the head and rarely leave the body for any reason.*
- b. Body lice inhabit the seams and linings of clothing, blankets and sheets and move to the body when feeding.*
- c. Crab lice live on the hairy portions of the body. The legs are adapted to grasp hairs which are rather widely spaced and, therefore, these lice prefer the pubic and peri-anal regions.*

4. How long do lice live?

Lice seldom live longer than 48 hours when removed from the human body. This is especially true with head and crab lice. Under ideal laboratory conditions, male body lice have lived as long as 32 days and female body lice have survived for 46 days; however, under normal conditions, even body lice seldom live longer than a day or two when deprived of their human host.

5. What is a “nit”?

A nit is a louse egg. Frequently, nits are the first observable sign of a head louse infestation.

6. How many eggs does a female louse lay?

Each female head louse may lay from 50 to 150 eggs in its lifetime while the female body or crab louse may produce 200 or more.

7. Where are nits found?

- a. *Head lice attach each egg to a hair shaft with a waterproof cement-like substance. These eggs are usually deposited on head hairs. The yellowish egg or nit (0.8 mm. long) is provided with a cap at one end to admit air and facilitate the escape of the young insect. They hatch in a week.*
- b. *Body lice lay their eggs in the seams or linings of undergarments—attached to fibers (wool preferred). Occasionally eggs are laid in bedding.*
- c. *Crab lice attach their eggs to hairs in the pubic or peri-anal regions. These eggs are smaller than the eggs of head or body lice and have a convex cap.*

8. What do lice eat?

Human lice are completely dependent upon human blood for sustenance. They suck blood for long periods of time, but do not ordinarily become fully engorged. They do not have to feed each day but rarely survive longer than ten days without food.

9. How do lice travel?

They are transported by people. Head lice and crab lice are carried on the body while body lice may also be transported in clothing or bedding.

10. Can a louse hop or jump?

No, a louse cannot hop or jump. Lice are wingless insects that have powerfully developed legs, each provided with a claw and an apposing thumb-like process that is adapted for clinging and gives the insect a strong grip.

11. How does a person get head lice?

Head lice are usually transmitted through close personal contact or through the use of common combs, brushes, or other grooming aids or through the sharing of hats, headbands, caps, wigs, curlers, or other headgear, or through the commingling of these items in shared lockers.

12. How does a person get body lice?

Body lice are usually acquired by close personal contact with an infested person or by wearing an infested person's clothing (shirts, pants, gym clothing, coats, sweaters, gloves, etc.) or the use of an infested person's bedding (sheets, blankets, quilts, etc.). This louse is seldom encountered in the United States since it thrives under conditions of extreme crowding and poor sanitation.

13. How does a person get crab lice?

Crab lice are usually acquired through close personal contact with a person who has crab lice or possibly through sharing of clothing, gym shorts, etc.

14. How does a person know when he has lice?

He may itch or he may be able to see the adults or eggs when combing his hair.

15. Can lice transmit diseases?

Louse-borne diseases are rarely encountered in the Americas and have not been encountered in the United States for many years. For this reason, lice are primarily important as pest insects rather than as disease carriers in this country.

16. Is the presence of lice an indication of low moral character?

No.

17. What should a person do if he suspects he has lice?

He should seek assistance from his physician, city or county health department, or the school nurse and follow their instructions. These instructions will usually include a schedule of specially medicated shampoos and the careful laundering of bedding and clothing. The entire family should be inspected and undergo simultaneous treatment if necessary. To control particularly severe head louse infestations, it may be necessary to cut the hair short to insure that medication will reach all lice and nits. A thorough washing once a week will do much to prevent head lice from becoming established.

18. Are medications available which kill both lice and eggs?

Nonprescription medications usually kill only the adult stages; however, several products are available by prescription which kill both lice and nits—occasionally, with only a single treatment.

19. Will soap and water kill lice?

Yes, if the water is hot enough. Such high temperatures are suitable for laundering purposes but not for shampooing the head or for bathing. Dry heat, steam, or pressing with a hot iron will destroy lice since they can live only a few minutes at 120° F. Most home water heaters supply water at 140° F to 165° F. Washing in cold or lukewarm water will not kill lice.

20. Should a home be sprayed, dusted, or otherwise treated with insecticides when an inhabitant has lice?

No. Lice do not hide in wall crevices and floor cracks like cockroaches or other household pests. Such premise treatment would, therefore, be wasted. Recliners, couches and other items of stuffed furniture have reportedly been found infested with head lice; however, it is doubtful that such furniture plays a significant role in head louse infestations.

21. Do commercial hair dryers attain temperatures high enough to kill head lice?

No. If temperatures hot enough to kill lice were produced, extreme discomfort would result from the use of these dryers.

22. Will hair dressings keep louse eggs from sticking to the hair?

No. Hair oils, pomades, or other non-medicated grooming aids do not prevent egg attachment. Although these products may serve as a minor deterrent to egg attachment, they should not be considered a valid part of a control program.

23. Do vinegar rinses help control lice?

No. Vinegar will not dissolve the cement-like substance used to attach the egg to the hair shaft.

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